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THE *RI*—UNIDENTIFIED AQUATIC ANIMALS OF NEW IRELAND, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

ROY WAGNER
Head, Department of Anthropology, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia 22903, U.S.A.

ABSTRACT: An aquatic creature roughly resembling the traditional "mermaid," and sometimes identified with it, is reportedly known through a variety of encounters with natives of Central New Ireland. The *ri*, as they are called, are frequently sighted by fishermen, occasionally netted or found dead on beaches, and sometimes eaten. Males, females, and juveniles are reported, subsisting on fish in the shallow seas around the Bismarck and Solomon archipelagos. It is unlikely that the animals are dugongs or porpoises, both of which are known to, and readily identified, by the natives.

Anthropologists working in New Guinea can generally expect to record long inventories of rather fanciful "bush" creatures—spirit beings, monsters, and fearsome animals. While the flora and fauna of New Guinea are by no means completely known or recorded, we know enough of its human inhabitants to recognize a tendency toward anthropomorphic projection: human existence is seen as immanent in the world, and changes or discontinuties in the landscape correspond to other "kinds" of people or beings.

Accordingly, I was able to record a fascinating menagerie of "bush beings" during my fieldwork among the Barok speakers of Central New Ireland Province, Papua New Guinea, in 1979–80 (Figs. 1 and 2). "But the *ri* is different," a well-educated school headmaster remarked to me, "it really exists." He was referring to an aquatic creature that is part of the regular experience of men, women, and children in a number of coastal villages in central and southern New Ireland. It is called, with the nominalizing prefix, *a ri* (pronounced "ah ree"), and is described as an air-breathing mammal, with the trunk, genitalia, arms, and head of a human being, and a legless lower trunk terminating in a pair of lateral fins, or flippers. There is a tendency for natives to identify *ri* with the depictions of mermaids they have seen on matchbox covers or fish cans, though legends about *ri* and stories of human encounters with them pre-date the coming of Europeans to New Ireland.

I first became aware of the phenomenon when an older informant, in his sixties, described to me the body of a *ri* that had been cast up on a beach when he was an adolescent. Shortly after talking to him, in November of 1979, I attended a pig feast at Ramat to consecrate a "men's house" which had been destroyed in World War II (Fig. 3). I casually asked one of the men present whether he had ever seen a *ri*. To my astonishment, he replied that one appeared almost every day on the flooded reef of Ramat Bay,

FIG. 1.—Location of New Ireland, a Province of Papua New Guinea. (Circle indicates the area of Fig. 2.)

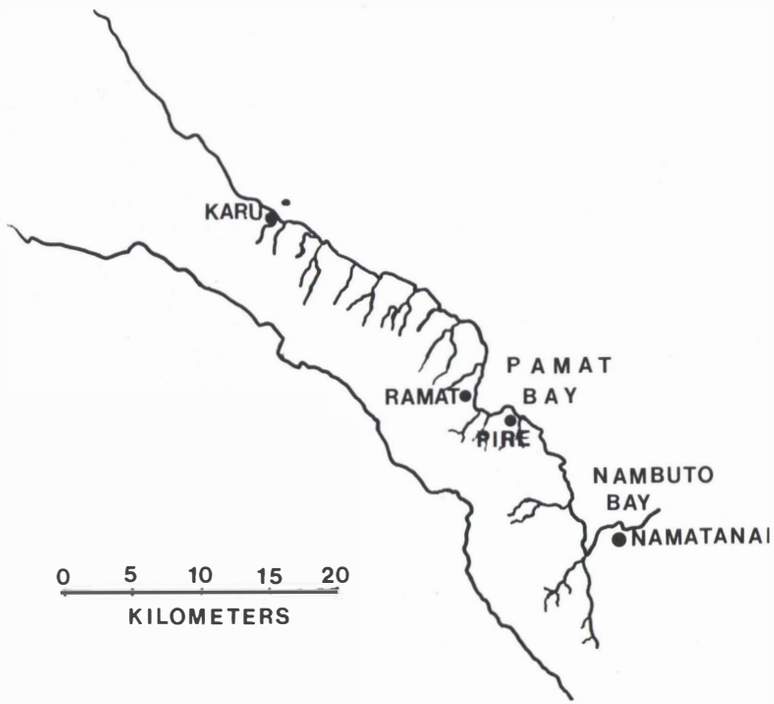

FIG. 2.—Area of *ri* reports and sightings, central New Ireland.

FIG. 3.—The pig feast to consecrate a "men's house" at Ramat.

offshore of his house, and that, when it had finished fishing, it would display its head and hands to those on shore, "to show that it, too, was human." The men, women, and children of his hamlet, he said, had seen it countless times, and he invited me to come out whenever I had the chance.

That evening, I drove over to his hamlet, located at the tip of the small bay (Fig. 4). When I arrived, he said the tide was out and that it was unlikely the *ri* would appear, but we went to look anyway, and I climbed a small tree at the water's edge. After perhaps a half hour, he became very excited and shouted: "There it is, there it is!" Gradually, I could discern, several hundred yards out, something large swimming at the surface in a broad arc toward the shore. We watched as it came closer, and the best view I got was of a long, dark body swimming at the surface horizontally. Suddenly, a sawfish jumped immediately in front of it (the range was close enough that I could identify the facial projection), and the dark object submerged and did not reappear.

Following this experience, I interviewed everyone I could find who had had encounters with *ri,* or claimed to know something about them. Several years earlier, for example, my host had been called to witness an adolescent female *ri* caught accidentally in a net by native fishermen (nets are the only way in which *ri* have apparently been apprehended). He left the *ri* on the beach in the charge of some young boys while he left to call a nearby plan-

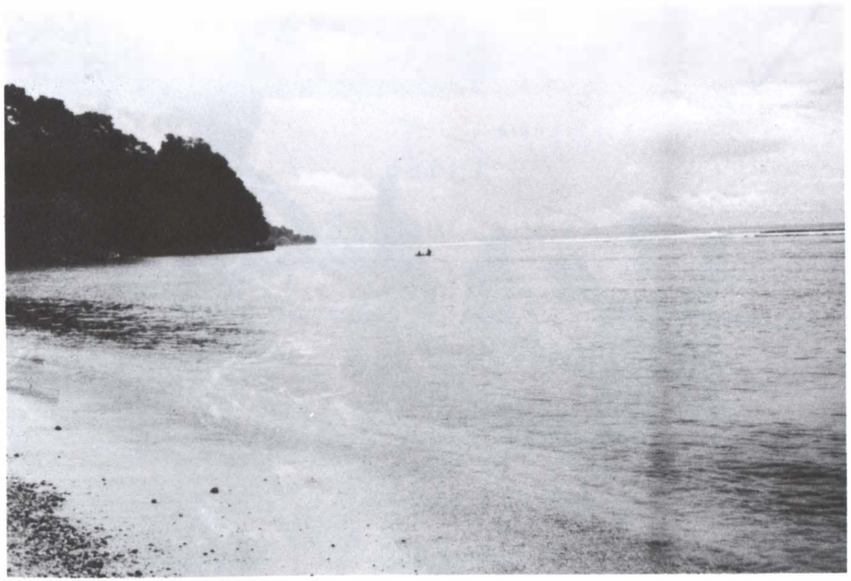

FIG. 4.—Reef at Ramat Bay, where *ri* sightings were made, and other encounters reported.

tation manager, but when he returned, the boys, shamed by the creature's nakedness, had allowed it to creep back to the water and escape.

About a year before my encounter, a village magistrate of my acquaintance had a face-to-face confrontation with a *ri* on a reef during a communal fishing expedition. The creature arose from the water and stared at him from a distance of about twenty feet. An ambivalent and sometimes violent man, the magistrate flung his fishing spear at the *ri,* "but I couldn't make up my mind whether to hit him or not, so I threw it crookedly. You would expect it to be frightened off; but no, it surfaced farther on and just stared at me again." When I asked him what the face of the *ri* looked like, the magistrate, who had formerly worked as a policeman in Rabaul, replied that it resembled "a monkey." The same man claimed he had, on another occasion, witnessed a male and female *ri* copulating in the surf. On another occasion, while discussing *ri* with an informant, a local boy of about ten interrupted our conversation to describe how he had seen a line of *ri,* male, female, and juvenile, swimming up into a freshwater stream by moonlight. Also, during their long December–January vacation, schoolboys often make a sport of diving offshore with glass face-masks in order to catch glimpses of *ri.*

More sobering were accounts of human beings deliberately killing *ri* for food. This is said to be done regularly on the offshore islands of Lihir, and at Siar, at the southern tip of New Ireland. I have interviewed quite a number

of men who claimed to have eaten *ri* flesh, and to have been present at the butchering of *ri.* My informants commented that *ri* have "a great deal of blood, like a human being, and their body fat is yellow." Out of curiosity, I asked whether there were vestigial leg bones in the lower extremity, and was told that its skeletal structure consisted only of an elongation of the spine.

A few years ago, a man from Manus Island was reported to have caught an old female ("there were two, but this one was too weak to get away") while net fishing near Namatanai. They hauled her ashore, and as they threw her into the back of a truck to be taken to Namatanai and butchered, "she uttered an almost human cry" of pain. The meat of *ri* is said to be sold on the open market in towns like Namatanai. There is also at least one account of a *ri* having been fed and kept alive in a native "men's house" for several weeks. At the end of inverviews, I would often ask why the *ri* was not shown to, or brought to the attention of, officials or colonial administrators, and was usually met with the reply: "But you people know all about *ri*; you put pictures of them on your matchboxes and canned goods."

Native tradition treats the *ri* along with other kinds of sea life. In one myth, a battle between the two totemic sea birds gave rise to the present-day shapes of various creatures: one hid between bark shields and became the turtle; the porcupine fish got its spines by being struck with many lances; and the *ri* were people who sought to escape the violence by becoming half-fish, "and their mouths, too, became fish-like."

The most widespread story, however, traces their origin to the Nakela clan of the east coast. It seems that once, before European contact, a Nakela troupe was performing a dance at the large, conclusive mourning feast, of *kaba'*. The percussion accompaniment made a serious blunder, bringing irreparable shame upon the clan, and the people considered how to wipe out the humiliation. Finally, they committed mass-suicide by jumping off a high sea-cliff; their bodies turned into rocks, which can still be seen there, and their souls became *ri.*

In the cultural context of the Nakela, it is not beyond the bounds of credibility that a blunder of this nature could be a source of great communal humiliation. The *ri* are *tadak,* or tutelary spirits of Nakela, and whenever one is killed or found dead, the Nakela hold a mortuary feast for it in their "men's house." An administrative official also told me that, in his youth, he had seen a fishing party throw back a *ri* that they had netted, crying "it is human," and fearing the anger of the Nakela if they had harmed it.

Eyewitness descriptions of *ri* vary considerably, though they concur on a number of points. The upper torso of the creatures is supposedly human or human-like, with long, dark head hair in both sexes, and skin that is lighter than that of Melanesians. The females have obvious mammalian breasts, and each sex has human-like genitals on the front of the lower torso. The

fingernails are long and sharp, the palms of the hands are deeply ridged and calloused, and there is something strange about the mouth. *Ri* are not regarded as being sapient creatures, as human beings are, probably because they are not known to speak (one informant claimed that they speak in whistles or whispers), but they are said to have a sense of shame, for they will often try to conceal their genitalia when exposed on the beach. *Ri,* in the native descriptions, are air-breathers who live largely in shallow water and sleep on deserted beaches or sand-bars. They live by catching and eating fish, and are said to be very wary of injury to their relatively thin, human-like skin, for blood quickly attracts sharks.

The information I collected indicates that *ri,* or at least accounts of *ri,* are distributed all around the central and southern shores of New Ireland, and through the stretch of water that separates New Ireland from Buka and Bougainville Islands in the Northern Solomons. An older Barok man of my aquaintance had served as a sailor on the Burns Philip ship *Maivara* in his youth, and he told me that he had once jumped overboard in the sea off Buka Island in an attempt to capture a *ri* that he saw basking on the surface, but it outswam him. I also interviewed a native from Aitape, on the north coast of New Guinea itself, who claimed that *ri* were quite frequently hauled in by fishermen there. This suggests a distribution around the shores of the Bismarck Sea, the Solomon Sea, and the Pacific proper off the shores of the Bismarck and Solomon archipelagoes.

Whatever the *ri* may be, they are certainly not dugongs. While the dugong is comparatively rare on the coasts of Central New Ireland, the Barok know it as *bo narasi* ("pig of the ocean"), and are perfectly capable of identifying it. For a Barok man to identify the corpse of a *ri* washed up on a beach or caught in a net as that of a dugong would be as unlikely as for an American hunter to bring home a deer on his front bumper and try to convince his neighbors it is a bear. Confusion with porpoises is even less likely; I myself became quite familiar with the sight and habits of coastal porpoises while in New Ireland, and *I* would not be able to confuse one with anything else.

Clearly, the various native accounts of the *ri* contain contradictions and improbabilities. While the *ri* are said to be venerated by the Nakela clan, and even accorded human status, they are reportedly butchered, and their flesh sold in the marketplace at some locations. It is difficult to understand how such disparate perceptions of the *ri* could have come about.

From an anatomical and evolutionary perspective, the physical descriptions of the *ri* also pose problems, but a discussion of these is beyond the scope of this article.

I don't think the credibility of some of my informants can be lightly dismissed, however. That, coupled with the general concurrence on many

features of the *ri,* strongly suggests that some such creature exists, and that it remains unknown to science.

The *ri* were peripheral to my research interests on New Ireland, but given the information I've recorded, a future investigation specifically directed toward ascertaining the existence and nature of the *ri* may be a worthwhile venture.